

# The Vascular Society of Southern Africa (VASSA)

The development of vascular surgery in the 1970s as a distinct subspecialty of general surgery was based on the fact that this discipline required a subtle but real difference in approach and surgical skills, with specific requirements for training. The subsequent development of a plethora of endovascular therapies during the last two decades has also mandated that surgeons practising in this field acquire skills that are not part of general surgical training. As a consequence for those interested in this emerging specialty, the formation of professional societies that promote excellence in the development, teaching and practice of vascular surgery became progressively more attractive.

An initial meeting of interested individuals at the Association of Surgeons congress in 1982 resulted in the formation of a steering committee that met in Bloemfontein in 1983 under the chairmanship of Kerneels Nel. They proceeded to form the Vascular Association of South Africa (SA) (VASA). Problems were encountered with the registration of the original name, and when the first general meeting was held in 1985 in Pretoria, at which the constitution proposed by the steering committee was adopted, the name Vascular Society of SA (VASSA) was formally approved. This was again changed in the early 1990s to the Vascular Society of Southern Africa (still abbreviated as VASSA) to allow vascular surgeons practising in countries south of the Equator/Sahara to become full members of the society. The objectives of the society, as stated in its original constitution, continue to be:

- to aim at the improvement and advancement of the study of vascular disease
- to act as a mouthpiece for medical and paramedical persons with an interest in vascular disease
- the advancement of knowledge and the science of vascular surgery
- to stimulate research in all aspects of vascular diseases.

VASSA has flourished since then. While the active membership base has continued to be modest, the society has had many noteworthy achievements under the leadership of notable SA vascular surgeons – the early presidents of the society were Kerneels Nel (1983 - 1985), John Robbs (1986 - 1990), Hymie Gaylis (1991 - 1992), Ed Immelman (1993 - 1994) and Lewis Levien (1995 - 1998). The most significant of these achievements was the registration of vascular surgery as a subspecialty of general surgery by the Health Professions Council of SA in 1993. Subsequent to this, VASSA has worked in close conjunction with the College of Surgeons of the Colleges of Medicine of SA (which is responsible for the current exit examination in vascular surgery) and six the SA universities that offer vascular surgical training. These universities are able to produce four to five vascular surgeons annually. As a result, the number of vascular surgeons in SA has grown from fewer than 20, when the subspecialty was originally promulgated, to just over 50 currently.

The society is well known for the quality of its congresses, symposia and workshops. The first congress in 1985 was also

the first VASSA function to which overseas visitors were invited. With the significant interest in carotid diseases at the time, it was appropriate that Andrew Nicolaidis from London and Wesley Moore from Los Angeles were the first international guests. Both subsequently continued to make substantial contributions to this field and have become household names in the field of vascular surgery. The society has hosted 15 very successful biennial VASSA congresses to date, as well as many other educational activities.

On the international front, VASSA was invited to be the southern African chapter of the International Society of Cardiovascular Surgery (ISCVS) in 1993 after extensive lobbying by Hymie Gaylis and Lewis Levien over many years. As a result, vascular surgeons in southern Africa became part of the world of vascular surgery. This allowed for greater participation in many of the world's premier meetings and resulted in an increasing interest on the part of many of the best-known vascular surgeons in visiting our country. The dissolution of the ISCVS in 2003 as a result of the widening gap between cardiothoracic and vascular surgery left a void that was then filled by the World Federation of Vascular Societies (WFVS) in 2007. A significant amount of the groundwork in preparing for the formation of the WFVS was performed by SA vascular surgeons. As a result, VASSA was one of the six founding member societies and in this position has held senior positions on the council of the WFVS since then.

In 2010, VASSA put forward a proposal to the WFVS that the first congress dedicated fully to the proceedings of the WFVS should be held in SA in 2014. This proposal was accepted and resulted in the first WFVS congress (and the 15th VASSA congress) being held in Stellenbosch from 2 to 5 October 2014. The congress was attended by more than 200 general and vascular surgeons, of whom more than 80 attended from 38 other countries. In parallel to this, a vascular nursing congress was held, at which ~100 SA nurses were exposed to an educational programme delivered by visitors from Canada and the USA.

Since its inception 30 years ago, VASSA has undoubtedly made extensive strides in both the educational and medical political spheres. The articles in this edition of the *SA Journal of Surgery* speak to success in some of the founding objectives of the society.

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